

ESSAY REVIEW

William Jackson Crawford on the Goligher Circle

The Reality of Psychic Phenomena: Raps, Levitations, Etc. by W. J. Crawford. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918. 246 pp. (hardcover). \$24.99 (paperback by Ulan Press, 268 pp., ASIN B0087KDU4I).

Hints and Observations for Those Investigating the Phenomena of Spiritualism by W. J. Crawford. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918. 110 pp. (hardcover). \$19.75 (paperback by Nabu Press, 126 pp., ISBN 978-1171753643).

Experiments in Psychical Science: Levitation, Contact, and the Direct Voice by W. J. Crawford. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919. 201 pp. (hardcover). \$23.99 (paperback by Ulan Press, 214 pp., ASIN B00B3DED4C).

The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle by W. J. Crawford. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1921. 176 pp. (hardcover). \$8.58 (paperback by Forgotten Books, 216 pp., ASIN B0087KDU4I).

The page references cited are preceded by the abbreviated book title: Reality, Hints, Experiments, or Structures.

In 1914, Dr. William J. Crawford, a lecturer in mechanical engineering at Queen's University of Belfast, Ireland, began investigating the mediumship of 16-year-old Kathleen Goligher. The phenomena surrounding the young girl included communicating raps, automatic writing, trance voice, floating objects, and table levitations. In all, Crawford had 87 sittings over some two-and-a-half years with the Goligher Circle. His first, third, and fourth books, as listed above, deal solely with the Goligher phenomena, while the second-listed book is very general and includes observations with other mediums.

Born in New Zealand, Crawford (1881–1920) received his D.Sc. from the University of Glasgow and authored several books in his primary field, including *Elementary Graphic Statics* and *Calculations on the Entropy-Temperature Chart*, before undertaking his research of psychic phenomena.

In addition to Queen's University, he also taught at The Municipal Technical Institute of Belfast.

The Goligher Circle consisted of seven members of the Goligher family—Kathleen, four sisters, their father, and the husband of one sister. Crawford noted that there was a psychic tradition in the family and all of Kathleen's sisters had mediumistic ability to some degree, but Kathleen was clearly the most powerful medium of the group. The séances were usually held in the attic of the family home, although Crawford occasionally held them at his own home and at the homes of friends.

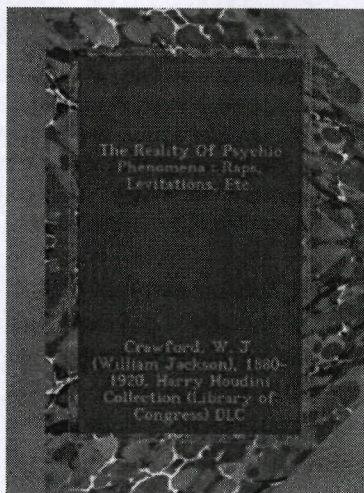
The books are lacking in other historical detail relative to the Goligher family, but indications are that the family members discovered their mediumistic abilities by experimenting with table tilting just shortly before Crawford began sitting with them in 1914. He says that they were Spiritualists, but it is unclear as to whether they were Spiritualists before the phenomena began. He calls Kathleen an upright and honorable young woman and states that she received no monetary recompense for her involvement in the circle. "Her mediumship is absolutely beyond dispute, as many people, some of them well known, are able with certainty to say," Crawford offers.

However, she knows it is my duty to set at rest the minds of those who are afraid of unconscious mediumistic action and the like; of those who, not having been able to attend her séances and see for themselves what actually happens, wish to know what precautions have been taken, and what independent witnesses have to say. (*Reality*:21)

Nor does Crawford give much detail about his other experiences with psychic phenomena. In his *Hints* book, he mentions sitting with other mediums, but provides no names or dates. In that book, he refers to the "Belfast circle," but it is not clear that he is referring to the Goligher Circle. Crawford recalls his introduction to mediumistic phenomena:

A number of us had been sitting round a small table in the usual way and had obtained the usual tiltings and usual mixed-up messages, when suddenly the table twisted round under our hands and did not stop until it had turned through nearly a complete revolution. It did this two or three times. The movement, which was so obviously not produced by any of us present and which we did not expect—this simple little turning movement—caused the first glimmer of doubt in my mind that all table tiltings, etc., were due to subconscious actions of the sitters, as I had strongly held up to that time. From that moment—now years ago—I decided to investigate the matter thoroughly. (*Hints*:61)

The *modus operandi* of a Goligher sitting, Crawford explains, involved the members sitting in a circle about five feet in diameter with a table placed in the center. The ordinary light would be turned off and a red light turned on. This light was ample enough to see all activity and movement in the room. The sitters would then join hands in chain order as one member of the circle would open with a prayer, after which a hymn would be sung to establish the proper harmony. "In a few minutes, sounds—tap, tap, tap—are heard on the floor close to the medium," he writes.



These are the first "spirit" raps of the evening. They soon become louder and stronger and occur right out in the circle space, on the table, and on the chairs of the sitters. Their magnitude varies in intensity from the slightest audible ticks to blows which might well be produced by a sledge-hammer, the latter really being awe-inspiring and easily heard two stories below and even outside the house. The loud blows perceptibly shake the floor and chairs. (*Experiments:3*)

The raps would sometimes keep time with the hymns sung by members of the circle and at other times they would tap out complicated rhythms on top of the table or on the floor. "Besides the ordinary raps the operators can produce various modifications and peculiar variations," Crawford continues.

For instance, they can imitate a bouncing ball so perfectly that one would be prepared to affirm a ball was really in the room. They can imitate to perfection the sawing of the table leg, the striking of a match, the walking of a man, and the trotting of a horse. They give double and treble knocks, i.e. two or three fast ones and one slow one. In fact, almost every variety and combination of rap it is possible to imagine is heard. (*Experiments:4*)

As the "operators" (Crawford's name for the "entities") effecting the phenomena explained to him, a semi-flexible "psychic rod" (or arm) issues from the body of the medium and is moved up or down to strike the floor or the table, thereby causing the raps, much like one might use a stick to beat a carpet. He opines:

I have no doubt whatever that the operators, i.e. the entities producing the phenomena, whether the reader looks upon such entities as spirits, our subconscious selves, or extra-terrestrial intelligences—have to do a good deal of experimenting in order to obtain satisfactory results. I have many times watched them experimenting in order to bring about some particular phenomenon they desired; they would keep trying even after repeated failures, and would not give in until they realized that what they wished was impossible of accomplishment. (*Hints:97*)

He further surmises that it requires the cooperation of many unseen entities to produce physical phenomena and that the medium and sitters are only the instruments through whom the work is done.

After 15 minutes or so, the rappings would stop and another type of phenomenon would begin. One such phenomenon involved levitation of the table. It would begin with small movements and lurches. "The little table is standing on the floor within the circle formed by the sitters and is not in contact with any of them or with any portion of their clothing," Crawford relates.

Suddenly the table gives a lurch or moves slightly along the floor. After a while it may give another lurch or it may rise into the air on two legs. These movements—which are executed, as I have said, without physical contact with the medium or the members of the circle—are the preliminary motions which usually take place just previous to the first levitation, i.e. before the table rises completely into the air of itself where it remains suspended for several minutes without visible support. (*Experiments:4-5*)

Crawford brought in a scale large enough to hold the medium while she was sitting in her chair. He discovered that when a table was being levitated, the weight of the table, usually around 16 pounds, was transferred to the medium through the psychic (ectoplasmic) rods extending from the medium. Most of the time, the transfer of weight would be a few ounces short of the weight of the table. Further experimentation revealed that the extra weight was being transferred to the sitters in the room, who apparently furnished small amounts of what Crawford calls "psychic force."

Crawford says that he witnessed hundreds of levitations under all conditions, but apparently the medium herself was never levitated as reported by Sir William Crookes with D. D. Home. In one sitting Crawford observed a stool rise four feet into the air and move gently up and down for several minutes while he examined it closely and while the medium was seated on a weighing machine. He also witnessed a table turn around completely in the air, turn upside down, and settle to the floor in an upside-down position.

Crawford states that he often worked under the levitated table and between the levitated table and the medium. The psychic energy seemed to peak an hour to an hour-and-a-half into the séance, at which time greater forces were exerted.

For instance, although a heavy man sits upon the table, it moves about the floor with great ease; or the table being levitated, a strong man pushing from the top cannot depress it to the floor; or the table moves to the side of the circle farthest from the medium and an experimenter is asked to lay hold of it and try to prevent its return to the center, but he is totally unable to do so; or the table's weight can be temporarily so much increased that it cannot be lifted, or on the other hand so much reduced that it can be raised by an upward force of an ounce or two; or the table being turned upside down on the floor cannot be raised by a strong upward pull on the legs, being apparently fastened to the floor. (*Hints*:7-8)

In his 1918 book, *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, Sir William Barrett, the British physicist who co-founded the Society for Psychical Research, tells of being invited by Crawford to a sitting with the Goligher Circle. Barrett wrote that they first heard knocks, and then messages were spelled out as one of the sitters recited the alphabet. He then reported observing a floating trumpet, which he tried unsuccessfully to catch, after which the table rose about 18 inches into the air and remained suspended. Barrett then put pressure on it and tried to force it down but failed. He then climbed on the table and sat on it, when the table began to sway and tipped him off. The table then turned upside down and settled back on the floor. When Barrett tried to right it, he could not budge it, but it later righted itself on its own accord. Barrett claimed to have heard an "amused intelligence" (Barrett 1918:47).

As for the difference between the contact phenomenon, where the sitters have their hands on the table, and the non-contact type, Crawford understood that the psychic force was coming through the fingertips of the sitters and was not a result of any muscular action on their part, while in the non-contact type, the medium supplies the psychic arm (ectoplasmic rods). "These invisible psychic arms probably grip the table by adhesion to its under surfaces or legs and thus bring about the movements which appear so mysterious," he writes (*Hints*:73,74).

When the levitations ceased, the trumpet phenomena would often begin. This involved a couple of thin metal cones which fit telescopically into each other and which were placed on the floor between the medium and her father. Crawford writes:

The trumpets now begin to straddle over the floor with little leaps and jerks, remaining in a vertical position until they reach the table in the center of the circle where they fall or are sometimes seemingly pushed over, and are then drawn under the table. A loud shuffling noise is now heard, for the operators are trying to detach the trumpets, a somewhat difficult process as they fit rather tightly together. At length, however, the operators succeed in separating the two pieces, which are soon seen floating in the air, with their ends projecting from under the table. The halves then beat time to a tune, like the batons of a conductor, after which a visitor is allowed to grasp the end of either and thus "shake hands" with the invisible entities. Sometimes the operators press upwards on the under-surface of the table with one or both of the floating trumpets, thus levitating it. A little handbell is sometimes placed on the floor and this is often lifted and rung. . . . Sometimes raps accompany the ringing of the bell. The sitters are occasionally psychically "touched" on various parts of the body. (*Experiments:6-7*)

Although he never uses the words *teleplasm* or *ectoplasm*, it appears clear that what he calls *psychic force* is the same thing. In his fourth book, he begins calling it *plasma*. He refers to it as feeling clammy, cold, and almost of an oily sensation:

[Plasma is] in fact, an indescribable sensation, as though the air there were mixed with particles of dead and disagreeable matter. Perhaps the best word to describe the feeling is *reptilian*. I have felt the same substance often—and I think it is substance—in the vicinity of the medium, but there it has appeared to me to be moving outwards from her. Once felt, the experimenter always recognizes it again. (*Reality:145-146*)

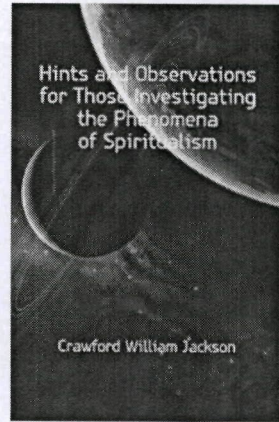
He goes on to say that

. . . in short I think there can be little doubt that it is actual matter temporarily taken from the medium's body and put back at the end of the séance, and that it is the basic principle underlying the transmission of psychic force. The table soon dropped when I moved my hand to and fro in amongst this psychic stuff. (*Reality:146*)

During his experiments with Goligher, Crawford began communicating with the "operators," one of whom said he was a medical man when on earth, and that his primary function now was to look after the health of the young medium. This "spirit" explained to Crawford that two types of substances were used in the production of the phenomena. One was taken in large quantities from both the medium and the sitters, then returned to them at the close of the séance. The other substance was taken exclusively from the medium in minute quantities and could not be returned to her as its structure was broken up. It was pointed out that it came from the interior of

the medium's nerve cells and if too much were taken she could suffer serious injury.

On one occasion, a clairvoyant joined in the circle and told Crawford that she could see "a whitish vapory substance, somewhat like smoke," forming under the surface of the table and increasing in density as it was levitated. She could see it flowing from the medium in sort of a rotary motion. From other sitters, she could see thin bands joining into the much larger amount coming from the medium. She also saw various spirit forms and spirit hands manipulating the "psychic stuff."



Unfortunately, Crawford is a much better technical writer than a reporter. He gives very detailed accounts of weighing experiments, with tables and graphs and photos of his instruments, but he rarely explains whether the "spirit communication" is coming to him by raps and taps, table tilting, automatic writing, trance voice, or direct voice. He says that Goligher was not in a trance during the séances, but still lists the trance voice among her phenomena. He does not list the direct voice, but the presence of trumpets suggests direct voice rather than trance voice as trance is usually not required during the direct voice.

While initially subscribing to the "secondary personality" theory, Crawford gradually changed his mind and concluded that they were in fact spirits of the dead. He explains his change of attitude:

[The subconscious] is the alternative I had in mind all through my investigations. As months succeeded month, as each new phase of phenomena was presented, as each new experiment was done, I always said to myself, "Can this very determined work of seemingly intelligent beings be but a simulation after all? Can it be all a fraud? Is it possible that nature holds intelligences belonging to ourselves or otherwise, which could so persistently deceive? Why should our subliminal consciousness (supposing we possess such a thing) carry out for us phenomenal demonstrations on the lines of reason and intelligence, requiring effort and system, for the object of deceiving us?" No! It seems most unlikely and repellant to our sense of the fitness of things. Nobody who has not delved deeply into psychic phenomena can have any conception of its tremendous variety and range. It includes telekinetic phenomena, apports, materialization, the direct voice, clairvoyance, clairsaudience, trance, etc., etc. There are, in fact, dozens of phases of psychic action, all consistent in the inference to which they lead, namely, that man survives death, and inconsistent on any other hypothesis. (*Hints*:101-102)

Crawford further concludes that much of what was being looked at as fraud by other researchers and superficial observers was spasmodic kinds of movements by the medium. "These are simply the reactions due to the raps and are what we might expect," he explains.

The seeker after fraud (who by the way is usually a person with no knowledge of science) immediately puts them down to imposture. My experiments, conducted over a long period of time and more thoroughly than any ever carried out hitherto, have proved to me beyond all question that the medium's body is either directly or indirectly the focus of all the mechanical actions which result in phenomena. And not only is it the focus but it also seems to supply a kind of duplicate of portions of her body, which can be temporarily detached and projected into the space in front of her. Thus, things happen in the séance room which, from the nature of the case, sometimes bear a superficial appearance of fraud, though, in a properly conducted circle it is only superficial, and the true and genuine nature of the phenomena can always be discovered by a little investigation. (*Experiments*:141-142)

As for the critics' claim that the phenomena amount to just so much tomfoolery, Crawford agrees that it seems that way, but he concludes that this attitude is a result of mistaken religious beliefs that we all become angels in the afterlife environment, when, in fact, we go over as we leave this world. In effect, most of the operators were not particularly advanced spirits and were simply experimenting on their side just as he was experimenting on this side.

The operators emphatically declare that the fact of death does not in the least degree alter a man's character. He is exactly the same five minutes after the passing as five minutes before it. So that the next state of existence contains all kinds and conditions of humanity, just as the earth does. They say that malevolence, envy, hate, and all the lower attributes inherent in earth humanity exist also in their world. There are not the two classes only—good and bad—as theology would have us believe. They say that the good bears a higher ratio to the bad than is the case here; so that we have an advance, if it is only a small one, so far as moral qualities are concerned. (*Hints*:17)

Crawford asked the operators if there were many of them looking on during the séances. "Whenever asked the questions they would begin rapping and keep on rapping until we were tired of hearing them," he writes.

They wished to indicate by this [rapping] that there were great crowds of spirit people looking on. They told me this was the case at all our séances. They gave me the impression that the séance room and the sitters were

surrounded by a huge invisible audience arranged in an orderly and disciplined manner, perhaps tier upon tier as in a lecture theater. The séance to many of them would appear to be as novel as it is to us. (*Hints*:18)

It was only during the last six months or so of his investigation that the operators allowed him to photograph the “plasma.” He was told initially that the medium would not be able to withstand the shock of the flashlight effect and that it was necessary for the operators to gradually prepare her for it. He writes:

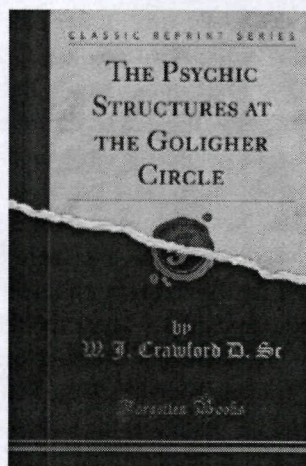
After innumerable attempts, very small patches of plasma were obtained in full view between the medium’s ankles. As time went on these increased in size and variety until great quantities of this psychic stuff could be exteriorized and photographed. Then the operators began to manipulate it in various ways, building it up into columns, or forming into single or double arms, molding it into different shapes with which I had been long familiar in a general way from previous investigation. (*Structures*:171–172)

Crawford died by suicide on July 30, 1920. Skeptics suggested that his suicide was the result of realizing he had been duped. However, four days prior to his death, Crawford wrote to David Gow, the editor of *Light*, the following:

My psychic work was all done before the [mental] collapse, and is the most perfect work I have done in my life. Everything connected with it is absolutely correct, and will bear every scrutiny. It was done when my brain was working perfectly, and it could not be responsible for what has occurred. . . . I wish to affirm my belief that the grave does not finish all. (*Structures*:v)

In 1922, Dr. E. E. Fournier d’Albe had 20 sittings with Kathleen Goligher and obtained limited results, leading him to report that Crawford must have been tricked. However, defenders of Crawford suggested that d’Albe did not bring the proper attitude or harmony to his investigation, thus discouraging phenomena, or Goligher had lost much of her power as mediums are known to do over time.

Although there is considerable overlap or redundancy among the four books, especially the first, third, and fourth, each book offers much food for thought. It may be difficult for many modern parapsychologists to reconcile



Crawford's qualitative research with their quantitative studies, but it is also difficult to dismiss Crawford as the victim of some charlatans over 87 sittings under ample lighting, especially when the likes of Sir William Barrett witnessed some very objective phenomena with the Goligher Circle.

It would be easy to pick holes in Crawford's scientific controls as he obviously saw no need to tie up the medium or completely avoid the Goligher attic. Moreover, one might be suspicious of a group made up of family members, but there does not appear to have been any incentive for the family to carry on a charade for such a long period of time with a man who apparently knew the family well outside of his research.

Crawford's observations of "ectoplasm" are consistent with those of Crookes, Richet, Geley, Schrenck-Notzing, Lodge, Hamilton, and Ducasse, and his photos of the substance speak for themselves, unless, as a last resort, one is to assume that he faked them. Crawford's weighing of the medium and the sitters during levitations are clearly detailed and to some extent replicate weighing experiments by Crookes with D. D. Home, although Crookes apparently never weighed Home during levitations.

Skeptics can also point to the reports that Crawford resisted efforts by other members (than Barrett) of the Society for Psychical Research to sit with the group. It is not documented why he resisted those efforts, but it had apparently become evident by that time that antagonistic researchers could easily defeat the phenomena by their negativity. "The presence of antagonistic and divergent intentions is a cause of disturbance and failure," Geley explained. "This reciprocal sympathy creates a harmonious atmosphere. Similarly, the constitution of the group should remain constant" (Geley 1927:11). It is apparently for this very reason that some leading physical mediums in the world today, e.g., David Thompson and Stewart Alexander, resist scientific scrutiny.

Crawford's research provides seemingly reasonable answers to many questions that have continued to exist since he reported on them nearly a hundred years ago. The lack of physical mediumship in the world today makes it difficult to replicate Crawford's work, but that only leads to the question of how many times a wheel has to be reinvented before it can be accepted.

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